

# THE IDEA OF INDIA CONCLAVE

**Rapporteur's Report by GARIMA SHARMA**

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**Constitution Club of India, New Delhi**

## **Session 1:**

Noted social worker and activist Harsh Mander, in his address as the session chair, emphasised the idea of India as the celebration of diversity and fulfillment of commitments of the Constitution, to ideals such as secularism, equal citizenship and individual freedom.

In her presentation, author Githa Hariharan further emphasised India's cultural and historical diversity which provided plural contesting spaces for competing narratives. She criticised the stifling of 'rational deliberation' and the role of 'new culture experts' as narrowing these spaces for negotiations and homogenising Hinduism itself. Concrete instances, according to Ms. Hariharan, can be seen in instances of censorship seeking to define 'good books', forms of art and movies.

Equating suppression of plurality with a 'colonist' and 'fundamentalist' mindset, poet and editor K. Satchidanandan emphasised the two forms that it takes through market-driven illusion of consumer sovereignty and the statist attempts to make plurality 'governable'. Above all these, however, is the attempt by 'political Hindutva' to completely wipe out plurality, as its very orientalist philosophy is based on homogenising ideals.

The homogenising ideal of Hindu nationalism was juxtaposed by screen-writer Saeed Akhtar Mirza with the competing post-Independence imagination of a pluralist and inclusive India. The former gave rise to a communal consciousness which has been abetted by both the Congress party and the Bharatiya Janata Party over the years. Born out of similar 'political choices', we see the glitz of the neo-liberal wave leaving discontent in its wake the current discontent and leading to the ascension of Mr. Modi.

To contravene the homogenising philosophy of political Hindutva, women's rights activist Syeda Hameed mentions India's rich 'mystic pluralistic tradition' of Hindu-Muslim confluence, as exemplified in personalities like Dara Shikoh, and political pluralism manifested in the freedom struggle through personalities like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Emphasising the present-day threat, she mentioned that today's full-fledged challenge is completely different from the organised targeting that minorities have faced previously.

In the context of these challenges, dealing with the new challenge becomes of utmost importance, as dancer and activist Mallika Sarabhai emphasises the need for 'action', based on an active assertion of identities by reaching out to people who think differently, in a 'daily process' at both the individual and collective level.

Finally, as Mr Mander concluded, pluralism should go beyond the mere acceptance of faith to include the 'higher morality' of the Constitution, which can counter the systematic segregation of the minorities and their relegation to 'second class citizenship', by building solidarity among suffering people.

## **Session 2:**

Emphasising the two kinds of imagination of India – secular and communal – author Ram Puniyani, in his address as the session chair, emphasised that the Modi-RSS nexus, manifested in Hindutva, symbolises the latter type.

Exploring the roots of the deep-rooted networks of Hindutva, documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan stressed on the collusion between Hindutva and corporate culture, especially as it manifests in the pliability of the media. This results in an equation between Hindutva and the ‘language of development’ through the privatisation and Americanisation of foreign policy. This requires bypassing the corporatised media to create alternative ‘spaces for dialogue’ through Internet and social media.

Another course of action has been proposed by journalist John Dayal, which involves reaching out to communities at grassroots levels, as contrary to the short-term targeting of communities by the Congress; the RSS espouses a long-term agenda of nationalising and mainstreaming the minorities at grassroots.

An important manner of this mainstreaming entails disciplinary action. As argued by Mr Anil Panikkar, social activist from Haryana, the state is able to ‘browbeat’ people by appropriating law, a process whose roots lie in the education system which encourages ‘regimented structures’ to foster individual obedience.

This would clearly create an attitudinal problem which fosters, according to civil rights activist Teesta Setalvad, a ‘culture of forced amnesia’ where society begins to regard state impunity as ‘routine’ and accepted the compromise of judiciary, media and ‘value education’.

## **Session 3:**

Emphasising the challenges at the socio-political level, Mr Arshad Ajmal, social activist from Bihar, documents how the ‘politics of arithmetic’ subverts the ideal of communal harmony. This produces hate-filled political campaigns which need to be countered by a ‘politics of love’.

An important element of this process, according to Mohd Arif, social activist from Uttar Pradesh, would be to strengthen the social-organisational coordination by re-establishing the links between the workers’ and peasants’ organisations, in order to counter the rising influence of the PMO in local affairs.

Highlighting the role played by the Aman Committee at the ground level, Mr Ramjan Chaudhry, lawyer and social activist from Haryana, also stressed the necessity of being connected with the propagation of social rights from the very beginning. This is crucial in averting catastrophes like communal riots and building solidarity.

At the level of active and detailed initiatives, Ms Tehmina Arora, lawyer and social activist from Delhi, suggested taking recourse to systematic processes of identification, training, community development, social service and legal measures, in order to effectively engage those on the ‘other side’.

Thus, in conclusion, as Prof. Apoorvanand, from the University of Delhi, has stressed, it is immediate action which is the need of the hour, by denouncing the mentality that we need to wait and watch what the new government does first. It is important to not reject any spaces but use all in any way that’s possible, including the media.

## **Session 4:**

The theme of inclusive India needs to be carried forward by first identifying the impediments that afflict our institutions. In this context, CPI leader Annie Raja has highlighted the complicity of the three branches of the government in leading the general institutional decline that has especially adversely implicated women belonging to minority caste and religious communities, as also those sections of society that are marginalised by mainstream development initiatives.

Further emphasising the importance of the marginalised sections of society, social activist from Madhya Pradesh Vineet Tiwari highlighted the necessity of taking into account intersectionality in people's identities to improve inter-organisational coordination and effectively oppose adverse economic policies, especially as pertains to the valuable resource of land.

This was further supplemented by the heart of the matter as laid down by Prof Kumkum Sangari, feminist-author, who saw the rising incorporation of women in the existing power structures by the system in which the patriarchal regime functions on a dual basis of family and community constraints and the extractive globalised markets giving rise to gendered labour, thus affirming the fact that the idea of inclusiveness, by which we get carried away, was never a reality but a constant struggle.

It is important to ensure that this struggle is carried forward in the strongest possible terms in the present changed context. Emphasising this theme and criticising the manipulative dangers presented by commonly trusted mechanisms of electoral democracy, that is, the Electronic Voting Machines, activist Shabnam Hashmi argued in favour of re-working the political alliances involving political opposition and secular parties, in order to challenge the party at the Centre.

Finally, highlighting the general institutional decline, Mr Colin Gonsalves, senior advocate of Supreme Court and founder member of Human Rights Law Network, who chaired the session, described what turns out to be a subtle politicisation of one of the most impartial institutions of the country, that is, the judiciary. Occurring over a long period of time and gaining ground now, the communalisation of judiciary has proceeded by the perpetuation of symbolic gestures such as *pujas* and purification.

### **Session 5:**

This session was primarily focused on the political issues and possible resolutions at that level.

Recognising differences between secular parties as primarily those of 'bruised ego' which need to be set aside, Mr Manoj Jha, national spokesperson for the Rashtriya Janata Dal, advocated a 'proactive' rather than a 'reactive' alliance strategy which needs to re-link the regional with the national level.

Going into a detailed diagnosis, Prof Anand Kumar, social scientist and national spokesperson of Aam Aadmi Party, called for a need to reject the 'disconnected political class' and develop consensus on political reform by focusing on '5Ps', that is, process, policy, programme, party-system and personalities, with the process being the most important and personalities the least. There is also a need to focus more on citizen activism rather than civil society.

Stressing the 'paradigm shift' in Indian society at the level of discourse going beyond secularism to other issues, the biggest concern, according to Mr D.P Tripathi, General Secretary of the Nationalist Congress Party, is how to orient the new conditions to their advantage, thereby requiring a consolidation of alliances and actually taking politics to the people.

Emphasising this further, according to Mr Mohammed Salim, CPI(M) MP from Raiganj constituency of West Bengal, there is a need to unite people and bring them on the 'streets' in order to articulate a 'common', 'repackaged' agenda.

In the opinion of Mr Pavan Varma, advisor to former Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, this requires a focus on the good governance message and a revival of the Congress to form a strong alliance. It should also be realised that since we are in a post-Mandal era of politics, therefore, nothing is permanent and adaptability is important.

Mr Sudhakar Reddy, General Secretary of CPI, conveyed the need to counter the pro-capitalist and communal party at the Centre by uniting the civil society and political class. Like other speakers in this session, he also advocated the need to promote the good governance agenda in a manner that thwarts the trap of neo-liberalism.

Finally, at a more practical-operational level, Mr Mani Shankar Aiyar, diplomat, writer and a veteran Congressman, emphasised that the BJP challenge is coincidental as the social values have not changed in the last five years, so the important thing, at the immediate juncture, is to re-build alliances but without insisting that there be unanimity on each and every point.

**5 July, 2014**

**India International Centre, New Delhi**

### **Session 1:**

With the focus of the session being on the economic perspective in the Idea of India, economist Deepak Nayyar, who chaired the session, highlighted the multiple dimensions of the crisis gripping the Indian economy, giving rise to a 'million mutinies'. While the media focus is on apparent and short-term aspects of jobless growth, poverty, inflation and inequalities, they are really symptomatic of the 'silent crises' that have seeped in education, infrastructure, agriculture and other crucial sectors, making India a laggard in Asia.

The core dimensions of the current dispensation, according to Prof Atul Sood of Jawaharlal Nehru University, are characterised by corporate takeover through the encouragement of foreign investors, an application of the Gujarat model and a sinister re-drawing of Centre-state relations to facilitate labour regulation, de-regulation of capital and land acquisition for capital.

The neo-liberal agenda continues to persist under the new government. This is despite the fact that FDI, as economist Biswajit Dhar, points out, contributes to less than 10% of the GDP, since major capital outflows get parked in tax havens and re-enter as investment, so that there are net capital outflows. They also have another disadvantage, according to Prof Dhar, in that NDA's silence on FTAs does nothing to alter the fact that the balance of trade is mostly set against India.

This misplaced neo-liberal focus is only compounding domestic problems as manufacturing and agriculture as main drivers of employment suffer a decline in their contribution to the national output, and inflation and arbitrary natural resources pricing go out of hand, argued journalist and political commentator Paranjay Guha Thakurta.

Finally, noted economist Prabhat Patnaik affirmed the general view that emerged from the session that we are not transiting from an 'old ideal state', but that the crisis we face is a continuing crisis of neo-

liberalism. Engaging with the classic conservative focus on fiscal consolidation to control state finances, Prof Prabhat Patnaik exposes the myth of the perceived financial burden of welfare benefits by arguing that since India has among the tax-to-GDP ratios in the world, we can definitely afford welfare schemes, since socio-economic rights constitute an important part of the citizenship matrix.

Thus, universalising rights, according to Prof Deepak Nayyar, becomes of utmost concern in order to counter the Hindutva agenda which has its 'social material' basis in the wreckage left by the Nehruvian era.

### **Session 2:**

Chairing the session, science and technology expert Prabir Purkayastha began the discussion by highlighting two kinds of vision of India, that is, the people-centric and the militaristic or boundary-oriented.

Emphasising the developmental displacement and unfulfilled promises caused by large scale nuclear projects, Mr Sukumar Muralidharan, fellow at Shimla-based Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, focused on the necessity of 'public audit' of these projects by looking into the contestation over the 'area of competence' and 'legal regime' of security agencies.

The issue of peace and security, deeply interlinked with the question of national sovereignty and territoriality occupies, according to political and social activist Aruna Roy, a jingoistic space in the popular imagination so much so that even 'income security' sometimes becomes secondary. A political misconstrual of this issue, bound up with the issue of borders, often leads to a neglect of the domestic dimensions of peace and security. This becomes particularly significant in vindicating the deep-rooted vilification of the 'rights-based discourse', by juxtaposing it with economic growth.

Supplementing the issue of domestic aspects of peace and security, Mr Irfan Engineer, Director at Centre for the Study of Society and Secularism, emphasised the need to recognise that the threat presented by communal violence has become less 'spectacular' but more dangerous and 'widespread', in an 'institutionalised system of violence'. Communal Violence Bill, according to Mr. Engineer, if implemented could have provided a good buffer.

Finally, recognising the imperialistic external and saffronising internal policy of the current dispensation, Prof Siddiq Wahid, academic and activist, calls for an abandonment of the 'melting pot' or homogenising approach to border lands, as the need to 'understand' them should take precedence over their 'inclusion' which will come later, as an effective strategy.

### **Session 3:**

Highlighting how the idea of India has become sharply divided because of the fragmented social and political reality, Prof Kancha Ilaiah, associated with the Maulana Azad Urdu University of Hyderabad, has argued that there is a need to especially focus on the inclusion of OBCs, which have long been vilified and marginalised by the political system and appropriated ruthlessly by the BJP, in order to draw them away from the mobilisation by the BJP, as they are the latter's main strength. This requires recognising the marginalisation they experience at the hands of both civil society and political parties.

Moving away from the changing contours of Indian politics in the present context, noted historian Mushirul Hasan has cautioned against attributing a 'constant meaning' to the 'idea of India'. The consolidation of India's pluralism, according to Prof Mushirul Hasan, found echo in Mughal emperor Akbar's tradition and was also consolidated through the orientalist and social reformist constructs during

the freedom movement. Exclusion, especially of Muslims, according to Prof. Hasan, is also not something new, as it was manifested clearly as a flipside of this tradition.

This historical context would also go some way in supplementing screen-writer Saeed Akhtar Mirza's argument that fascist ideology is not linked to any particular group, but is rather a 'state of mind' and there is no reason why accountability should not be pinned down for the deaths that have occurred since Independence.

Finally, contributing to the search for solutions, the idea of India, as Justice Kolse-Patil notes, has been very well incorporated in the India Constitution, although its non-implementation and judicial capture has rendered this idea unrealised.

#### **Session 4:**

Capturing the spirit of the session in contributing to an alternate imagination of the future, Ms Jagmati Sangwan, Haryana state president of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), highlighted that apart from the need for more discursive spaces, there should also be an encouragement of alternate media, since recent times have seen such an elitist-hegemonising shift in the nature of the Indian state that the confluence between media and dominant interests has become all too common.

In this context, blaming the 'secular parties' for selecting stereotypical Muslim representatives, activist Zakia Soman, founder of Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan, emphasises the need to re-assert identities in order to ensure that socio-economic and political reform benefits reach the minorities, by contesting draconian laws such as POTA.

At an even more discursive level, it is important to re-negotiate with the very idea of the Constitution. As lawyer and women's rights activist Vrinda Grover points out, the government of India has a convenient strategy of taking refuge behind the Constitution, in international fora, to evade questions on its record. This gives rise to a misrepresented idea of plurality which needs to be contested.

There is also a need to tackle organisational and distributional conflicts that have an impact at the level of culture. As social activist from Gujarat Gagan Sethi argues, this entails a contestation of the one-man leadership concept, push for entitlements and a 'culture of commons' by resisting privatisation, better research and locally-focused analysis, move from district to a Parliamentary constituency approach and a sound reform agenda.

Finally, a call on the way forward and the possible courses of action, according to political scientist Zoya Hasan, who chaired the session, needs to be based on an acknowledgement of the 'paradigm shift' that has taken place in Indian politics. This requires a 'broad-basing' of opposition alliances to mount a challenge and also needs to be supplemented by an understanding that an assertion of identities in itself, as a plan of action, would be ineffective unless it is also concomitant with socio-economic justice.